KÉLÉ IN ST. LUCIA — A MINORITY CULT EMERGING FROM THE UNDERGROUND

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Among the many cultural traditions of the small Caribbean island of St. Lucia, the *Kélé* cults holds, in many regards, a special position. Until very recently this minority cult of the *Djiné* families has been the least known, but at the same time the most disputed of all the many cultural traditions of the island. This has been due mainly to the fact that the ritual actions of a *Kélé* ceremony, often termed as ancestral worship, culminate in a blood sacrifice, during which a ram, along with other food and drinks, is offered to African gods and ancestors. Foreign clergymen in particular, and also creole- speaking St. Lucians, who were aware of its existence without being actively involved, always treated the *Kélé* tradition of the *Djiné* with disrespect and condemnation – sometimes even calling it "pagan worship" or "devil worship". As a result this cult had been forced underground since it first appeared on the island over a hundred years ago. Only in recent years has *Kélé* been emerging from its underground existence, and is now a major focus of the ongoing debate on cultural identity, in keeping with a more positive public attitude towards the African cultural heritage. The reasons and circumstances responsible for these developments over the past hundred years will be discussed in this paper.

In order to better be able to perceive of the *Kélé* tradition in the wider context of St. Lucian culture, we might refer to the words of Harold F. C. Simmons, a pioneer of St. Lucian folk research. In 1963 he characterized the West Indian folklore tradition thus:

> For various historical reasons, the West Indian folk tradition is an *underground* tradition. Its songs, dances, festivals, beliefs and customs manifest an unceasing attempt to create forms of expression for a way of life which is at variance with established authority, orthodox religion, upper class morality, law, and other cultural forms having the sanction of authority. It has nevertheless consistently appropiated to its own use large fragments of the culture of the world above it. It has been under constant attack from the pulpit, the law makers, and its language is being pushed gradually out of existence by educational policy as well as by social forces not directly subject to control. (Simmons 1963:41).

This holds especially true for the *Kélé* cult in St.Lucia – formerly called by the populace *Plaisir Guinee* (Simmons 1963:45) – which has remained a nearly pure African tradition of the *Djiné* families. As such is has not only been attacked form the pulpit, but also by the majority of creole citizens. To have a better understanding of this, we have to go back in history over one hundred years and examine the social and cultural conflicts since the time of the first arrival of *Djiné* families on the island soon after Emancipation in 1838.

Djiné versus Creole Ex-Slaves

As a result of the abolition of slavery in 1838 St. Lucia – like the rest of the British West Indian islands – experienced the arrival of several immigration waves of liberated Africans (Kolar 1985:442- 489). Those immigrants, who came directly from the Guinea coast in Western Africa, called themselves *Djiné* or *Nèg Djiné* (formerly written Negre Guinee) – thus differentiating themselves from the majority of St. Lucia's creole population composed mainly of the descendants of former slaves.

One of these groups constituting the most prominent of the *Djiné* families on the island today, is said to have come from Yorubaland in Western Nigeria – namely from the *Ekiti* tribe (ref. Olawaiye 1980). According to their oral traditions they arrived in St.Lucia around the middle of the 19th century. Among the first generation of immigrants were the famous names of the founder families like *Assau, Joseph* and *Delaire.* They were leading members of African cults, namely of the *Shango* and *Ogun* traditions (ref. Barnes 1980, Bascom 1972, Ogundele 1965, Pollak-Eltz 1968, Simpson 1962).

These two religious traditions from Western Nigeria soon merged in St. Lucia to form a new cult, the *Kélé.* It is remarkable to note that, whereas most other religious cults in Afro-America have undergone syncretistic influences mainly with the Catholic religion (ref. Kremser 1988, Simpson 1980), the development which brought the *Kélé* in St. Lucia into existence could rather be termed as a syncretism between different African traditions (ref. Barber 1981, Edwards & Mason 1985). Up until now no Christian influence has been found in the *Kélé* ceremony.

According to Simmons (1963:45) the *Kélé* ceremony, the "most exotic" tradition of the island, began in St.Lucia "in about 1867, shortly after the arrival of families from Western Nigeria, of the *Ekiti* tribe, thirty years after the abolition of slavery".

Since then the *Djiné* were deeply involved in the practice of *Kélé.* These religious rites, directly imported from their African homeland, were termed as "pagan customs" by the members of the Christianized creole

population, and met with strong disapproval. Henceforth the *Djiné* were treated with great contempt by their fellow creole citizens, who used to scold them *"Mal Djiné"* whenever they performed their religious rites. This made their integration into the creole society extremely difficult.

Consequently, the *Djiné* formed their own settlements in remote locations around the "mysterious" *La Sorcière* mountain, with the high priests of the *Kélé* being not only their religious leaders, but also their political leaders, as well as the judges within their groups. The *Djiné* organized themselves in small village communities with a pronounced group solidarity, and preferred to intermarry within their founder families. They also held on to their African idiom – not only within the ritual context of their *Kélé* ceremonies, but also as a means of communicating between themselves (ref. Dalphinis 1985). The African idiom was also used as a secret language vis-a-vis outsiders. Compared to the neighbouring creole population and the *Nèg Congo,* the *Nèg Djiné* were also "considered to be superior and more versed in the mysteries of nature and magic" (Simmons 1963:45).

The high-priests of the *Kélé* cult fulfilled several functions within the *Djiné* groups. Not only were they the leaders of the *Kélé* ceremony, but they also were specialists in what they refer to as "African bush medicine". This knowledge in herbal medicine was sometimes linked with the practice of producing poisons for "black magic", called *Djinéfication.* These substances would be found in the calabash which is smashed at the end of every *Kélé* ceremony. It is associated with the African Orisa *Eshu,* also named *Akeshew* in St. Lucia. In Christian interpretation this word means "devil" (ref. Zander-Giacomuzzi 1981).

In order to protect their villages around the *La Sorcière* mountain from outside interference, they succesfully managed to build up a strong reputation as being dangerous *Obeahmen,* associating themselves with the meaning of the name *La Sorcière* (witch) and *Mabouya* (evil spirit) which was the Amerindian name for it. This way of deliberately giving themselves a fearful spiritual image can be seen as another subtle form of resistance against foreign intrusion and domination.

All these factors led to an increasing isolation of the *Djiné* from the rest of St. Lucian society, and finally caused their going underground as a cultural group.

The Djiné in the Context of Resistance in St. Lucia

The history of cultural resistance and physical withdrawl, especially into the *La Sorcière* mountain massif, dates back much longer. Over the past centuries the slopes around *La Sorcière* have always served as a

place of retreat for different groups of St. Lucian society, which were either threatened by their new rulers, or marginalized by the established authorities, even by the dominating creole population.

CARIBS: The first group to withdraw into the dense forests of this mountain massif were the *Caribs* in order to escape being subjected to the British and French invaders and colonizers. According to some sources, the priests of the Caribs used to have their sacred places with altars consisting of huge stones on top of that mountain, which they themselves had named *Mabouya* (or *Maboya)*, meaning "evil spirit" (ref. Rochefort 1665:471-484). There are rumors that they had performed human sacrifices on those altars.

MAROONS: Soon after, towards the end of the 18th century, hundreds of slaves escaped from the plantations along the north-eastern coast of the island, and took their refuge in the jungle of *La Sorcière.* There these maroons, called *Nèg Mawon,* met up with the *Carib* groups, who joined them in their struggle of resistance against slavery.

DJINÉ: A few years after Emancipation in 1838 the area around *La Sorcière* faced the arrival of the *Djiné.* They had originally landed in *Choiseul,* in the south of the island, and then moved on to the north-eastern part of St. Lucia to work mainly on the plantations in *Mitai, Grande Anse,* and in *Marquis Estate.* Since their integration into St.Lucian creole society failed, they settled down in remote areas after some years of hard work on the plantations. One of their leading members, *Assau,* established himself in a place called *Resina,* located on the north-western slopes of *La Sorcière.* There he bought about fifty acres of land which since then is called *Morne Assau* on the mountain, and *Fond Assau* in the valley. The descendants of *Assau,* especially *Coutou* and *Simeon Joseph,* were leading members of the *Kélé.* Around the *La Sorcière* mountain they still met isolated groups of *Caribs,* with whom they exchanged their knowledge in "bush medicine" and "magical practices". During the first decades the *Djiné* lived there in relative isolation from the rest of St.Lucian society. Only when the new road was built in the 1950s to link the area of *Babonneau* and *Fond Assau* with the Capital *Castries,* they became better known to the outside world.

RASTAFARIANS: The last St. Lucians to withdraw into the *La Sorcière* mountains in very recent times were small groups of *Rastafarians* since the 1960s. They chose to live a natural life, far away from *Babylon* system, and erected their bamboo houses high up in the mountain. However, in 1984, they were captured during police raids

and forced to leave, after most of the territory had been declared as water ressource by the Government of St. Lucia.

The Kélé Cult Under the Attack of the Church

The first documented evidence of *Kélé* in St. Lucia was a brief description in the local press by the island's leading ethnographer, Harold F.C. Simmons in 1942. In a later article Simmons (1963:45) states that

> the ceremony, since 1954, has been forced underground by the Roman Catholic Church, which seemed unaware of its existence until I wrote a brief description in the local press in 1941. The Church has forbidden its members to participate in kele, stating that it perpetuates the old-age beliefs in *obeah, quimbois, piaye, guardese* and other practices of sorcery.

These accusations sometimes were accompanied by the missionaries' threats to excommunicate baptized *Djiné* who practiced *Kélé*.

In April of 1973 Fr. Patrick A. B. Anthony, the founding director of the *Folk Research Centre,* St.Lucia, an institution geared towards the documentation and promotion of various aspects of St. Lucian traditional culture, was the first local Catholic priest to attend a *Kélé* ceremony at *Babonneau* with a view towards documenting it for further study. As a consequence, he came under severe attack by his superiors:

> As word of our attendance at that ceremony got around afterwards, Fr. Charles Jesse, Defensor Fidei for the diocese and also editor of the diocesan newspaper 'The Castries Catholic Chronicle', wrote an article against the ceremony entitled 'The Kele Sacrifice to Shango' (Anthony 1986:104).

In this article Rev. Jesse (1973a) called the ceremony "a public act of pagan worship" and claimed that

> the KELE is planned, organized ritualistic sacrifice, offered to the African deity SHANGO. It is offered by a person who considers himself, and is considered by others, as the priest of that deity. Incantations to that deity are made in the course of the ceremonies, and they constitute an act of worship. The whole set-up of altar, symbolic stones, secret ceremonial, ritual slaying of the victim or victims, chants, and the partaking of the sacrificial flesh – all indicates a pagan, religious rite [...] we are not here in presence of a quaint old tribal costum or charming old piece of folklore: we are in presence of an act of pagan worship. As the Scripture tells us, the gods of the pagans are demons: SHANGO WORSHIP IS DEVIL WORSHIP. No Christian may take part in it (1 Cor. 19-21).

This religious and cultural intolerance expressed by a leading representative of the Catholic Church was not reciprocated in the same way by the high-priests of the *Kélé* cult. In contrast, at the beginning of a *Kélé* ceremony the high-priest usually appeals to incredulous observers

> explaining that it is the same Catholic god being implored in the ceremony since "there is only one God". *Footnote:* It should be noted that all participants would be baptised Catholics and regular churchgoers. Both the leader and his assistant – at the 1973 and 1983 Keles which I attended – were prominent members of the Holy Name Society in the parish of Babonneau, and actively involved in many parish functions (Anthony 1986:107+118).

However, the conflict between the Catholic Church and *Kélé* continued until the early 1980ies, which experienced a sudden change of attitude in questions of cultural identity and tolerance. As a consequence the *Kélé* emerged from its 100 years of underground existence in St. Lucia.

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